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AUTHOR Smrekar, Jocelynn Luisa
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ABSTRACT

A study used the Preschool Teacher Verbal Behavior Index (PTVBI) to measure the extent to which classrooms were learner-directed or teacher-directed. The instrument can be used to help teachers learn the appropriate degree of control for different classroom situations and individual learner needs. Verbatim teachers statements are categorized as reflecting, information, guidance, encouraging, neutral, praise, limit-setting, directive, or intervening. Four classrooms were observed for 20-minute periods every other week for 16 weeks. Teacher statements were recorded and coded, and non-verbal interactions (gestures, tone of voice) were also noted. Distribution of teacher statements among the nine categories was analyzed. Results indicate one teacher was learner- centered, one teacher-centered, and two slightly more learner- centered than teacher-centered. In addition, one child with limited English skills in each class was observed, and it was found that of these, the children making the most statements and showing the most language growth were in the learner-centered classrooms. It is concluded that the PTVBI is useful in studying classroom communication. Contains 21 references. (MSE)

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The Impact of Learner-Centered Classrooms on Second Language Learning: Communicating With Educators

Jocelynn Luisa Smrekar

Texas A&M University--Kingsville

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Introduction

As we prepare our teachers to meet the needs of children in the 21st century, helpful strategies for interacting with the growing number of linguistically and culturally diverse children need to be incorporated in teacher preparation programs. The purpose of this paper is to examine teacher behaviors which have been identified through research as being helpful for second language learners. The results of a study using a specific performance assessment of teachers, the Preschool Teacher Verbal Behavior Index, to measure the degree to which second language learner classrooms are learner-centered will be discussed.

Literature Review

There have been numerous books and articles discussing the classroom and curricular needs of second language learners. In one such book, Richard-Amato & Snow (1992), posit several suggestions for instructional strategies to be used in a classroom with language minority students. Some suggestions that are especially relevant to classrooms with young children are: provide a warm environment with help readily available; use as much one-on-one communication with the child as possible; use visual aids and advance organizers; demonstrate and act out to clarify meanings; do not insist that a child speak, reinforce important ideas & concepts many times; assure the child that his/her language is acceptabie & valued; appreciate & include the child's culture.

Eugene Garcia (1993) is another author who has written about the education of linguistically and culturally diverse children. He says the curriculum content should be closely tied to the children's environment and experiences. Linguistically and culturally diverse children should spend more time on informal activities, says Garcia, particularly group work. Additionally, "Children should have opportunities to study a topic in depth, to apply all kinds of skills they have acquired" (1993, p. 382). According to Garcia, teachers ought to allow students to play an active role in the learning

process because learning occurs when children are actively involved rather than passive.

In another study, Phyfe-Perkins (1980) found that the most successful early childhood educators were those whose interactions with children had a low level of teacher-directivity. High teacher-directivity is the strategy being used when the teacher plans and directs most activities (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren; 1993). It has often been called the "transmission style" of teaching. Low teacher-directivity, on the other hand, means that a classroom is learner- or child-centered. Traditional classrooms with highly teacher-directed instruction are seen in stark contrast to the learner-centered instruction found in developmentally appropriate classrooms.

There are several disadvantages to the children in a classroom with teacher-dominated interactions (Wells, 1986). One such disadvantage is that to children, it may appear that only the teacher's perspective is relevant. Children in this classroom are expected to follow the teacher's line of thinking and to engage in "teacher-prescribed tasks" (Wells, 1986, p. 242). In this classroom it is expected that children will stay on task and learn when they are closely supervised by the teacher. In this classroom children become passive learners.

The antithesis of a teacher-directive classroom is a developmentally appropriate classroom. Here, play is an important part of the developmentally appropriate curriculum because play, in this philosophy, is considered to be the primary vehicle by which young children learn (Gestwicki, 1995). "Child-initiated, child-directed, teacher-supported play is an essential component of developmentally appropriate practice" (Bredekamp, 1987, p. 3).

Play, because of its relationship to language learning, is an important component of the second language learning child's curriculum. This relationship has been documented by Levy's (1986) review of the literature on the relationship of play and language development. She found there was a definite link between language

and play (e.g., Smilansky, 1968; Garvey & Hogan, 1973; Garvey, 1977; Corrigan, 1982). Furthermore, Levy found several studies which posited that intervention through play can increase language development (e.g., Smilansky, 1968; Lovinger, 1974; Yawkey & Marback, 1980; Rogow, 1981).

In addition to play, other conditions have been identified which promote the development of speaking skills for second language learners. Levine's (1993) study found that the following classroom conditions contributed positively to language development in linguistically diverse children: a secure, caring environment; a speaker/listener who provides optimal input; an interactional classroom environment characterized by small cooperative groups and; a motivation for speaking.

Cummins, a well-known bilingual educator, proposed that teachers empower students by "encouraging them to become active generators of their own knowledge" (1989, p. 63). He said that one pedagogical model of "transmission" is when "the teacher initiates and controls the interaction, constantly orienting it towards the achievement of instructional objectives" (1989, p. 63-64). According to Cummins, the transmission model of teaching contradicts basic principles of language and literacy acquisition. A more effective model of pedagogy which allows reciprocal interaction between teachers and students is the "interactive/experiential" model, says Cummins, and one major characteristic of that model is " guidance and facilitation rather than control of student learning by the teacher" (1989, p. 64).

Lastly, Brown states that second language learners are more successful when empowered by intrinsic motivation than when empowered by extrinsic motivation, and that intrinsic motivation gives the learner autonomy (1990). More recently Tabors & Snow found that the best classroom learning opportunities for preschool second language learners was one in which the teacher gave the children plenty of chances to "engage in useful and purposeful language interactions with sensitive interlocutors, both adults and peers" (1994, p. 123). The preschool teacher's verbal behavior, then,

influences second language learners. When teachers allow students to play an active role in learning and to generate their own knowledge, when teachers guide and facilitate rather than controlling the students, then teachers will be supporting the basic principles of language and literacy acquisition.

In summary, evidence shows that young second language learning children seem to excel when teachers allow them to play and to take an active role in learning. Children have an active role in learning in learner-centered classrooms. Knowing that a learner-centered classroom is ultimately the most fruitful for young second language learners and has already been espoused by the Texas State Board of Education in *Learner -Centered Schools for Texas* (1994), the next logical step is to aid teachers in identifying those strategies that make their classroom more learner-centered.

Methods

Teacher preparation programs in areas of the US with large numbers of second language learners, as well as, reflective inservice teachers may benefit from a performance assessment of teachers which can measure the degree of learner-centered vs. teacher-centered classrooms. One performance assessment of teachers that has been used is called the Preschool Teacher Verbal Behavior Index. It can be used to measure one teaching strategy, specifically, the degree to which a classroom is learner-centered.

The purpose of the PTVBI is to give educators an opportunity to learn about "the appropriate degree of control for different situations and individual needs" (Withall, 1991, p. 149). The PTVBI is a method through which preschool teachers' verbatim statements can be categorized which then allows teachers to reflect on "the degree of control exerted during interactions with individual or a group of young learners" (Withall, 1991, p. 148).

The PTVBI is a continuum or scale with nine categories of teacher verbal behavior which are consciously or unconsciously used to enhance either the teacher's

control or the learner's control over the learning process.

Categories 1-4 are used to categorize teacher statements which "enhance the young learner's control over his/her actions, choices, aims" (Withall, 1991, p. 149). "Category 1 maximizes the young learner's agenda and aims" (Withall, 1991, p. 150). Categories 6-9 are used to categorize teacher statements that strengthen the teacher's control over the child/ren's actions, choices, and aims. "Category 9 maximizes the educator's agenda and purposes" (Withall, 1991, p. 150). Category 5 is used for neutral statements which strengthen neither the teacher's nor the child's control.

This study involved using the PTVBI to measure variations in four teachers' verbal. The instrument measured whether the learning processes in the classroom were learner directed or teacher directed. There were nine categories on the data coding sheet: Reflecting, Information, Guidance, Encouraging, Neutral, Praise, Limit Setting, Directive, Intervening.

Participants' classrooms were observed for twenty minute time periods. At the time of the observation the teacher's verbatim statements were written on a coding sheet. The teacher's non-verbal interactions such as gestures, hugs, or tone of voice were also recorded. Where pertinent to understanding the transcript, the children's statements or actions were recorded. As soon as possible after the observation, the transcript was read and all statements were categorized according to the nine codes. Only one code was made for each statement regardless of its length. This process was repeated for each of the observations every other week during the 16 week study. A total of nine hours of data were collected. For each observation the number of statements in each category and the percentage of statements in each category were calculated.

This instrument was tested by Withall (1991) for content validity. Content validity was determined by having the instrument reviewed by educators and

developmental psychologists. Criterion validity was established by finding the percent of agreement by three categorizers with the researcher. The percent of agreement over all nine categories of the instrument was 80%. The percent of categorizer agreement in identifying whether a teacher's strategy resulted in teacher control or learner control was 90%. Criterion validity was also established by coding transcripts with Withall's Social Emotional Climate Index (SECI) (1949). This was an instrument of known validity and reliability for measuring teacher verbal behavior.

Results

The results of the study using the PTVBI with four teachers showed that one of the teachers was learner-centered, one was teacher-centered, and two were slightly more learner-centered than teacher-centered. After the teachers' verbatim statements had been coded according to the system specified in the PTVBI (Withall, 1991), the frequencies and distributions of codes in the nine categories were totalled for all the observations done of each teacher. Separate histograms were made for each teacher and each site with the percentages of teacher statements found in the nine categories. According to Withall, "Categories 1-4 are strategies used to enhance the young learner's control over his/her actions, choices, and aims", while "Categories 6-9 are strategies used to enhance the educator's control over the young learner's actions, choices, and aims" (1991, p. 149). At one end of the continuum, Category 1 "maximizes the young learner's agenda and aims" and at the other end of the continuum "Category 9 maximizes the educator's agenda and purposes" (Withall, 1991, p. 150).

PTVBI data from Site 1 indicates that the largest percentage (32%) of the first teacher's statements were in Category 5, Neutral. Of the 157 statements coded for her, only 36 (23%) were in Categories 6-9, enhancing teacher control. The statements coded in Categories 1-4, enhancing learner control, amounted to 42 or 27%. She made encouraging statements, Category 3, only 3% of the time. Overall, her

classroom is slightly more learner controlled (27%) than teacher controlled (23%).

At Site 2, analysis of the second teacher's 491 statements on the PTVBI, revealed that her classroom at tended to enhance learner control. 302 statements, constituting 62% of her total statements were categorized in Categories 1-4. By contrast, only 113 statements, or 23% of her statements enhanced teacher control. The types of statements she made most often were Information (25%) and Guidance (26%). The type of statements made least often (3%) by the second teacher were Intervening statements. Overall, her classroom definitely maximized the learner's agenda (62%) rather than the teacher's agenda (23%).

At Site 3, the third teacher's 334 statements were coded using the PTVBI and percentages calculated. She used Praise only 2% or 6 times during the observations. The category of statements she used most often was Information, making up 22% (74) of her total statements. Grouping the statements in Categories 1-4 reveals that 45% (150) of her statements enhanced learner control. Categories 6-9 made up 35% (117) of her total statements. Generally speaking, her statements in the classroom at Site 3 leaned more toward learner control (45%) than teacher control (35%).

At Site 4 the fourth teacher made 480 statements which were coded. Coding revealed that during the observations there was no incidence of Category 1, Reflecting and only 3% of her statements (13) were Encouraging. In Categories 2-4 there were 155 statements (32%) enhancing learner control and in Categories 6-9 there were 291 statements (61%) enhancing teacher control. Category 8, Directive, made up 29% (139) of her total statements, while Limit Setting accounted for only 1% of the statements. The fourth teacher used more than twice as many statements which enhance teacher control (61%) as statements which enhance learner control (29%).

To summarize, the data from the classroom observations, as interpreted with the PTVBI, showed through the verbal interaction at Site 2, the second teacher definitely afforded children control over their own learning. By contrast, at Site 4 the teacher's

verbal interaction provided her with control over the children's learning. Although not as extreme, the teachers' verbal behavior at Sites 1 and 3 showed that in the classroom they both afforded the learners more control over their own learning processes.

Implications

In addition to using the PTVBI, four children, one child who knew little or no English in each of the teachers' classes, were observed for 5 months. The amount and type of language produced by the children during 30 videotaped hours of play were analyzed.

A correlation was discovered between the results of the observations of the children and the teachers. The children who made the highest frequencies of statements were in the learner-centered classrooms. By contrast, the children in the teacher-centered classrooms made significantly fewer utterances and showed much less language growth.

Conclusions

Obviously maturational forces accounted for part of the changes seen in the participants over the course of the study but, more environmental factors appear to be relevant in this discussion. By comparing the results of two quantitative parts of my study (the measurement of the number of utterances produced by the children and the PTVBI measure of preschool classroom climate), I found that the child who had the highest frequency of utterances correlated with the classroom with the highest degree of learner- control.

Specifically, two children were in an environment where the teacher allowed them to have control over their learning process as evidenced by the results of the Preschool Teacher Verbal Behavior Index (Withall, 1991). These two children spoke many more utterances overall, 757 during six sessions and 2202 during eight sessions respectively, than the other two who spoke 699 and 355 utterances

respectively, both during eight sessions. Apparently, the children who were in environments that were more learner-controlled than teacher-controlled were the ones who spoke more. This finding seems to support Garcia's (1993) theory that linguistically and culturally diverse children will be more successful students when they play an active role in the learning process and when teachers implement a student-centered curriculum.

This study's results also adds further support to Levy's (1986) findings that there is a relationship between play and language. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that when classrooms are more learner-centered, and consequently more developmentally appropriate, there is dramatically more language growth in second language learners.

The use of the Preschool Teacher Verbal Behavior Index as a performance assessment of learner-centeredness demonstrated by teachers in the classroom could be utilized in schools and teacher preparation programs, especially in areas where classrooms contain numerous linguistically diverse children.

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